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SUBJECT: Senegal: Looming Electoral Crisis

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In early December, the Ministry of Interior hosted a series of meetings with members of the ruling Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS) and opposition parties to discuss revisions to the Electoral Code. Two days after the talks began the opposition Benno coalition walked out, outraged by what they said was the ruling party's unilateral push to make undemocratic amendments to the Code. In a subsequent meeting with the Ambassador, the Benno leaders decried the uncooperative attitude of the ruling party arguing that President Abdoulaye Wade's sole objective is to use whatever means at his disposal to rig the 2012 presidential elections for a favorable outcome. They claimed that they were prepared to oppose the organization of any elections, violently if necessary. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In their meeting with Ambassador Bernicat, ten leaders of the opposition made the case that President Wade is seeking to distort the democratic process. In his presentation for the group, Serigne Baye Thiam, the spokesperson for the Socialist Party, said that they had come to the meeting with the government to discuss 60 points that had been drawn up for debate but that the first motion they had made was to have the discussions opened up to more people from civil society and NGOs. Thiam recalled that in the 1990s and early 2000s talks to discuss electoral reform had always been chaired by someone with an independent profile. The fact that this time these talks were being lead by the Director General of Elections at the Ministry of Interior showed that the government was bent on controlling the process and that they would not negotiate in good faith. He underlined this by highlighting earlier announcements by Minister of Interior Becaye Diop, who said that polling hours should be extended to 22:00 and that journalists should be forbidden to announce any results in the media before the closing of the polls. (Note: These early announcements via cell phones and independent commercial and community radios contribute to transparency, making it almost impossible for any one party to claim a false victory or forge documents in the formal process of aggregating votes at national level. End Note) According to Thiam this was a unilateral statement, and that the issue had never even come up during the talks.

¶3. (SBU) Thiam then characterized as outrageous a Senegalese Democratic Party proposal that the official tally of votes in each voting station be considered valid without the signature of the various elections officials present. He also criticized the arrogance of the ruling party when both Becaye Diop and Abdoulaye Babou, a senior PDS leader at the National Assembly, went on TV to say that if push comes to shove the PDS could act unilaterally to change whatever they wanted in electoral legislation.

End of Consensus

¶4. (SBU) With the PDS now opting to use its political strength, as opposed to dialogue, to impose its agenda, the opposition views this development as the end of what has generally been a consensual process on electoral issues. Additionally, opposition members characterized as very troubling Wade's move to force the head of the Autonomous National Electoral Committee (CENA) to resign.

Meanwhile, the opposition has identified another potential area of fraud in the lack of reliable birth records and the issuance of birth certificates. A senior opposition leader claimed to EmbOfs that this time the GOS is planning to use judges to issue birth certificates and administrative measures have already been taken to notify local courts to hold public rulings where judges can issue ordinances allowing people without a birth certificate to be issued one on the basis of oral testimonies.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) There seems to be a flurry of electoral issues, which make some suspect that Wade might organize early elections in 2010 or early in 2011 rather than waiting until 2012. Initiating major infrastructure projects and creating labor-intensive programs in the suburbs to employ young people seem to reinforce this notion. In answer to a question about their disunity and whether they need to agree on a unified candidate before it is too late, the leader of the Socialist Party, Ousmane Tanor Dieng, forcefully claimed that they would not be driven by Wade's agenda. Former Prime Minister Macky Sall added that they have an action plan to inform the Senegalese people about what is going in their country, but the reality remains that the President does drive Senegal's political agenda and he has every legal tool at his disposal, however unethical, to do what he wishes to ensure the most favorable conditions for a reelection victory.
Bernicat